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ABSTRACT

Research has not addressed issues of life meaning in a life-span developmental framework. The Loss and Transcendence paradigm was developed as a humanistic-existential approach to life-span development which has as its central theme the concept that individuals are in a continuous process of creating their lives and their selves. To explore loss and transcendence over the life-span, 48 women aged 25-67 were interviewed with the Loss and Transcendence Life History Form. Eleven issues regarding life meaning were investigated, including what is meant by life meaning, the prevalence of the belief in life meaning, whether life meaning is found or created, the relationship between belief in meaning and one's orientation to loss or transcendence, and whether a taxonomy of meaning can be found. The majority of respondents reported feeling that life had meaning. The results revealed that: (1) individuals throughout their life reviews demonstrated orientations to either loss or transcendence; (2) individuals exhibited patterns of losses and transcendence over their lives; (3) networks of events, thoughts, and feelings represented death and life to respondents; and (4) grieving, searching, replacing, and reintegrating were all stages of the loss and transcendence process. Qualitative analysis revealed four different types of self, and loss and transcendence were traced for individuals over their life spans. These findings hold significance for an existential life-span developmental paradigm. (NB)

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by

Patricia Weenolsen, Ph.D.

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Patricia Weenolsen, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology
Seattle University
Broadway and Madison Avenues
Seattle, WA 98122

Phone: (206) 626-6664 (Work)
(206) 322-9124 (Home)

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Patricia Weenolsen, Ph.D.

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Seattle University
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ABSTRACT: For an exploration of loss and transcendence over the life span, 48 women aged 25-67 were randomly selected and interviewed with the Loss and Transcendence Life History Form. A number of issues regarding life meaning were investigated. What do people mean by life meaning? How prevalent is the belief that life has meaning? Is life meaning found or created? If created, how? What is the relationship between belief in meaning or meaninglessness, and one's orientation to loss or transcendence? Can we discover a taxonomy of meaning? Is this taxonomy developmental in nature? This paper discusses the findings and concludes with an evaluation of their signficance for an existential life-span developmental paradigm.

Traditionally, questions of life meaning and related issues of death meaning, have been the province of existentially-oriented philosophers, religious thinkers and fiction writers (i.e. Sartre, 1964; Tillich, 1952; Buber, 1961; Heidegger, 1962; Kierkegaard, 1946; Koestenbaum, 1976; Tolstoy, 1884; Camus, 1946; 1948). A number of existentially oriented clinical psychologists and other social scientists have also defined life meaning as a central problem of human existence (Frankl, 1963; Maddi, 1970; Binswanger, 1958; Boss, 1957; May, 1977; Becker, 1973; Laing, 1976; Moustakas, 1958; Fromm, 1941; Gendlin, 1962; Yalom, 1980). However, no empirical study has addressed issues of life meaning in a life-span developmental framework.

I have been developing a humanistic-existential approach to life span development (Weenolsen, 1978; 1982; 1984; 1985(a); 1985(b); 1986(a); 1986(b); 1988). In order to set the context for the aspect of the study that I am reporting in this paper, I will summarize some of the major concepts of this paradigm. Then I will very briefly describe the central methodology and some of the major findings of the overall study. Finally, I will present the findings with regard to life meaning.

MAJOR LOSS AND TRANSCENDENCE CONCEPTS

The central thesis of the Loss and Transcendence (L/T) paradigm is that we are in a continuous process of creating our lives and our selves. Our lives are the external aspects of our identity; our selves are the inner aspects. This creation of lives and selves proceeds according to the stages identified in the developmental literature, however, the crucial elements of these stages are loss and transcendence. Loss is defined very broadly; it is any event, thought or feeling that destroys some aspect of one's life and/or one's self (the one cannot be affected without the other). This can be the loss of a loved one, a job, a material possession; it can be a loss of will, freedom, control, plans, expectations, hopes, ideals or illusions. It can be a loss that is chosen or imposed, originating within the individual or without. Transcendence is the overcoming of loss and the re-creation of the life-self. There is no human activity, major or minor, that does not represent a loss and a transcendence of some kind to the individual experiencing it.

Loss is a metaphor of death, and transcendence a metaphor of life, birth, immortality or resurrection. We are in a continuous metaphorical struggle between life and death.

In a life filled with death, both actual and metaphorical, a central developmental task is the creation of lives and selves that are meaningful. We create that meaning through the transcendence of loss. Our lives and selves are meaningful to the extent that our transcendence of loss is greater. They are meaningless to the extent that our transcendence of loss is less.

METHOD

To test aspects of this paradigm, and after a pilot study, 48 women aged 25-67, evenly distributed by five-year age groups into Married-Employed, Married-Unemployed and Unmarried-Employed groups (16 each) were randomly selected from a western, urban-suburban coastal community. They were interviewed with the Loss and Transcendence Life History Form (Weenolsen, 1978), and other measures.

MAJOR FINDINGS

The major findings of the entire study were as follows:

1) Individuals throughout their life reviews demonstrate orientations to either loss or transcendence. This was confirmed with an inter-rater reliability of .86 (Weenolsen, 1982; 1985-a).

2) Individuals exhibited a pattern of losses and a pattern of transcendence over their life spans; specific types of both loss and transcendence tended to be repeated. This I have termed the Loss and Transcendence Life Theme. The finding was confirmed by an inter-rater reliability of .85 (Weenolsen, 1985-b).

3) There were networks of events, thoughts and feelings that represented "death" to individuals, and networks that represented life. These I term metaphorical systems, and the Loss and Transcendence Life Themes were a kind of shorthand for them. This confirmed the hypothesis of metaphorical life and death struggle. Death is not only something that happens at the end of life.

4) The stages of the Loss and Transcendence Process are Grieving, Searching, Replacing and Reintegrating. Individuals were found to be in one stage or another.

5) By qualitative analysis, four different types of Self were identified. These may actually turn out to be stages of Self formation. Those who were relatively "unborn" were loss-oriented; some live alternate lives through other selves; others seem "split" or fragmented; and finally some have a "kinesthetic" sense of wholeness in the process of growth, and are integrated.

6) Finally, Loss and Transcendence is traced as the individual develops over the life span (Weenolsen, 1988), as well as its manifestations in personality, psychopathology, society and culture.

ISSUES: LIFE AND SELF MEANING

In previous studies of life meaning, the investigators have sought to define the topic for the interviewees, either explicitly or implicitly, or the interviewees have begun with their own definition (c.f. Crumbaugh, J. & Maholick, L., 1974;

Braun, J. & Dolmino, G., 1978; Klinger, 1977). While this is proper research procedure, it has the unfortunate result of creating the phenomenon whose existence it seeks to validate. In this study, the definition of life meaning was left to the interviewees. Self meaning was implicit in all questions of life meaning, according to this paradigm.

Eleven issues concerning life (and self) meaning were investigated. First, how pervasive is the belief that life has meaning? That it is meaningless? Second, what do people mean by the "meaning of life?" Third, what makes life meaningless? Fourth, Can we begin to develop a taxonomy of life meanings, one that is related to other major dimensions of the individual's life? Fifth, what is the relationship between belief in life meaning, (and in one meaning specifically), and one's stage in the L/T Process, as well as Sixth, one's orientation to either loss or transcendence? Seventh, is the life meaning reflected in the Loss and Transcendence Life Theme, and if so, how? Eighth, is life meaning found (as Frankl believed) or created? Ninth, if created, how? What is the method of meaning creation? Tenth, how conscious are individuals of the creation of meaning as a developmental task? And Eleventh, can we trace the development of the meaning of meaning?

FINDINGS: LIFE AND SELF MEANING

Does Life Have Meaning? The question that interviewees answered was as follows: "Do you believe life has meaning." As indicated above, great care was taken not to define terms. The results were as follows: 38 of 48 women responded that life did indeed have meaning, 8 said it did not, and 2 did not know. There were no significant differences for age or marital-employment status, an indication that the perception of life meaning is not necessarily an attribute of being single or married, employed or unemployed, old or young.

The Definition and Classification of Meaning - A Taxonomy: The interviewees were asked the following question: "When we talk about meaning of life, how would you define it?" The definitions of meaning in the interviewees' answers

can be categorized into four groups.

In the first group of answers, it was clear that what the interviewees interpreted as "meaning" was a kind of cosmic purpose; the purpose of one's life is designed by, and residing in, a supreme being, and it is preordained. Della's views are typical of this position. She says: "I think God places us in each life to accomplish, to be fruitful, and for me that's our relationship with other people, that sharing Christ with them, sharing love with them. The only Bible that they might read, or the only Christ they might see might be in me."

In the second group, there is still cosmic purpose, deriving from beyond the self, but it does not emanate from a divine being or plan; rather it is part of a process of ultimate personal, social and spiritual growth. One might call this definition spiritual, but not religious. Marjorie exhibits this meaning for us when she says: "The meaning of life is evolution - personal, social and spiritual." She sees this as part of a cosmic evolution, the development of humanity, and not simply in individual terms.

The third meaning is still one of purpose, but it is a specific one which resides in the individual, such as an achievement of some kind, or a goal, that is, in terms of what gives, or would give, meaning to that particular individual's life. Examples are "Education," and "Doing something worthwhile for others in a service or philosophical way," and "I think we have to be productive, make a contribution of some kind." In each of these cases, the interviewee had been engaged in the specific activities that reflected these meaning definitions. For example, at age 55 Ursula discovered that she was dyslexic, which explained her aborted education. She returned to school as she had always longed to do, took special training, and even won a short story contest!

Finally, the fourth group speaks of a personal purpose which is more general, in terms of values, and not pursued via specific activities, such as "loving," "being happy," "sharing with friends," and "feelings of joy and love." These were values

not mentioned in the rest of the interview.

Thus, we have a fourfold taxonomy of "meaning of life" definitions, two originating beyond the self, and two originating within the self. These can be labeled cosmic-specific, cosmic-general, individual-specific and individual-general.

The Definition of Meaninglessness: "Is there anything without which life would be meaningless?" asked the question of meaning in reverse. Loss of love, not unexpectedly, headed the list; loss of love objects, of child, church, God, husband, friends, "others to share with" were stressed. Loss-oriented individuals tended to answer that life would be meaningless without something which they had already lost, or were currently in danger of losing, thereby inadvertently suggesting their lives were meaningless. The transcendent individual responded either with a loss she had never sustained, or with a clear implication of attempting to overcome it. (Example: "Loss of a child, loss of body capabilities, body health or ability to get around. That would be a real test for me.")

Relationship to Loss and Transcendence: Loss-oriented individuals are those who tell their histories mostly in terms of the losses they have sustained. Transcendence-oriented individuals, on the other hand, recount their lives in terms of overcoming and growth. There was a tendency among the loss-oriented, or those who were struggling with a particular loss that was thematic of the protocol, to answer that life had meaning in terms of a positive outcome to their struggle. For example, the answer that love was the meaning of life was given by a number of respondents in whom the repeated loss of love was thematic of their lives. Implicitly, they were therefore suggesting that life might not have meaning, because it seemed filled with loss of love. The loss-oriented answered in terms of what they did not have, whereas the transcendence oriented replied in terms of losses overcome. Those who answered in terms of their losses were in the Grieving or Searching stage of the L/T process. Those who saw their lives in terms of overcoming and re-creation were in the Replacing or Reintegrating stage. These responses were often reflected in the L/T Life Theme.

Life Meaning Found or Created?: Frankl (1963) believes that individuals must search for, and find, the meaning of their lives, which for him originates in divine design (the cosmic-specific class of the above taxonomy); to say that individuals can invent meaning is, to him, absurd. Frankl's position seems incongruous with the existential view that, even though individuals are "thrown" into their particular life circumstances, they must take responsibility for how they respond, for their own decisions, conflicts and commitments - that indeed, they create their own meaningful lives and selves in this sense.

In this study, those who believed that meaning originated in divine design, and who simply trusted in this, did not see themselves as creating life meaning. But those who saw life meaning in terms of spiritual growth, specific life purposes or general, abstract goals, such as happiness, were much more likely to see themselves as active in life meaning creation.

Method of Creation: One method of life and self meaning creation seems to be the process of life review. Both clinical and popular literature claim that the life review is an end-of-life phenomenon, rather than an ongoing process (cf. Butler, 1961). I have found that, on the contrary, individuals report that they are conducting a virtually continuous review throughout their lives. Questions were asked of the interviewees as to whether or not they had ever conducted a life review similar to the one they had just completed, as well as at what age they had started thinking about such questions, the importance they attributed to the life review, and its uses. Seventy-one percent of the interviewees reported that they think about such questions often or occasionally, while 29% reported that they think about them rarely or never, only one interviewee claiming that she never thought about such questions.

Neither age nor loss-transcendence status seemed to be associated with frequency of life review. Women of all ages, marital-employment groups and loss-transcendence orientations found the life review important - 98% of our sample

- thus, its importance is not restricted to older people or those who are loss-oriented, as is perhaps popularly believed. Most interviewees report having engaged in the process of life review beginning before the age of thirty. Most also report that their life reviews have increased or stayed the same as they grew older, rather than decreasing.

Life and self meaning are created by the life review in three major ways. First, reality is reconstructed and mythologized. A man gives his friends a blow by blow account of how he was fired from his job; the boss's words get rearranged, the customer's complaint is subtly blown up to seem even more unreasonable; the loyal co-worker's praise of his past record becomes more high-flown. The story undergoes subtle changes with each retelling. Friends and family help in the construction of the myth. A loss is gradually minimized, so that it can be overcome, and the life-self recreated in a more positive mode.

The second purpose of the life review is to form a platform from which to launch future conduct. Evaluation of where one has been in relation to where one wants to be, the discrepancy between the reality and the ideal, lessons that have been learned - all assist and guide decisions regarding the future. These decisions, it is hoped, will minimize the metaphorical deaths of life, and therefore make it more meaningful.

Third, and related to the other two, is the evaluation or judgment of congruence between behaviors and standards or ideals, and the consequent readjustment of one's perception or one's behavior to agree more closely with one's values.

Two additional points must be made regarding the life review as a process of meaning creation. First, it is probably not always a conscious or deliberate process. For example, the mere telling of a section of one's life to a friend is a partial life review of sorts, and accomplishes some of the same goals. It is part of the process of evaluation and myth construction. Second, the quality of the life review may be different at different ages; indeed, it may be quite different

at the end of life, obviously less personal-future oriented as one faces death. There may be more of an urgency to complete the story in final draft!

The Development of Meaning: We can turn to the literature of life span development to see how the notion of meaning develops. I discuss this in detail in my book, but the following is a brief glimpse of a few major ideas.

Meaning requires interpretation, and we interpret our life events according to our own individual paradigms or theories. From birth to death, each of us is engaged in the continuous process of seeking to make sense of our life experience. As infants we begin to construct our own pre-theories about the world out of the information that comes to us through our senses (Piaget, 1952). We find that a certain smell, and a certain touch to the lips, the feeling of liquid trickling down our throats - all are associated with comfort, warmth, drowsiness and content. This is our world and the meaning of it. As we grow older, we read the meaning of an angry or smiling face, we learn that "hi!" is approach or nearing, that "all gone" is disappearance, and all the other symbolism of language. Things have functions; they are to be used for certain purposes and not for others. Later, ideas, like fairies and goblins, can exist without sensory referents.

Thus, gradually, life experiences and their interpretation become instrumental, semantic, symbolic, conceptual and metaphorical, as well as sensory - the product of an increasingly complex organism interacting dialectically with the world. A person or object represents not only itself, but also it represents our own relationship to it, its relationship to other objects, as well as other selves, and finally its place in a world of which we are continuously attempting to create some meaning or make some sense. The meaning of experience is created on different levels at different stages of development. Fire warms the two-year-old, but it may also cook the food, or burn the hand. The teen understands very well what is meant by "lighting my fire," whose burn may be infinitely more painful than that of the fire on the hearth. To the adult, fire may also consume or purge, may burn white

hot in the noon of life, or may be more peacefully banked in evening.

Eventually, we move to a point where the "meaningful" takes on larger connotations. We ask if life has meaning, because we become capable of envisioning an entire lifetime in the context of its limitations, that is, its metaphorical deaths. We deplore the meaningless tragedy. We cannot "understand" or "comprehend" the deaths of six million in a holocaust. To die may seem absurd. "Life has no meaning." This requires a vast restructuring of life, self, meaning, and the rules for construction of that meaning. We develop a system of beliefs, values and attitudes, our philosophy, by which we evaluate our lives as worthy of continuing, or not. ("Unworthiness" leads to psychopathology.)

DISCUSSION

In his splendid and comprehensive work synthesizing the fields of existential philosophy and psychology, Irving Yalom (1980) summarizes the various meanings of the phrase "life meaning." He sees definitions as falling into two categories, which he terms "cosmic meaning" and "personal secular meaning," sometimes called "terrestrial meaning" by philosophers. According to Yalom, cosmic meaning rests within western religious traditions; the individual was put on earth by a divine, all-knowing and intentional entity; his/her life is part of the divine plan, and living in accordance with this plan will result in ultimate reward, the joyful transcendence of death. A sense of cosmic meaning "lifts the individual out" of him/herself, and is, according to Frankl (1963), far superior to secular meaning. Personal secular meaning is the purpose in an individual life, which Yalom believes is embodied in altruism, (one of Vaillant's defense mechanisms, 1977), dedication to a cause, and creativity, which help the self go beyond the self, as well as hedonism and self-actualization, which are based within the self. Yalom believes that cosmic meaning is distinguished by a sense of coherence in the life plan, whereas personal secular meaning is distiniguished by a sense of individual purpose.

Yalom (1980) agrees with Frankl that personal meaning such as hedonism and

self-actualization, which does not lead to self-transcendence, may actually make meaningful relationships impossible, because the individual is immersed in the self and cannot reach out. He speculates that "there is a gradual evolution of meanings throughout an individual's life cycle" from the teen pre-occupation with self to Erikson's (1950) stage of generativity or concern with matters beyond the self. Yalom cites Vaillant's (1977) study and other evidence that altruism and self-transcendent behavior increase with age, concluding, however, that many women, have had altruism forced on them in younger years, and evolve to an undesirable preoccupation with self in middle age (pp. 440-441)!

While my empirical findings are congruent with Yalom's superb scholarly integration of philosophy and psychology, there are several problems with his life cycle discussion. First, it is dangerous to make value judgments on which type of life meaning is more desirable, higher or better. The individual who finds or creates cosmic meaning may be snuggling into the arms of a god who takes over much of the responsibility for his/her existence; or s/he may not have thought out his/her position, but simply accepted it - dangerous when trauma or tragedy challenge beliefs born of conformity, as they surely must; or s/he may be otherwise repressing, displacing, or employing Calvinist-like concepts to appear to be one of the elect. In other words, no system of meaning can be judged superior, even one which can nest individual purpose within cosmic plan, as our taxonomy suggests.

Second, Yalom makes the distinction between individual meaning as purposive, and cosmic meaning as giving coherence. Actually, my findings suggest that the individual life meaning may include a sense of purpose and coherence, the sense of purpose lending coherence to a life. The cosmic meaning often includes a sense of divine purpose, as we have seen. Yalom's important distinction between purpose and coherence is better served, I think, by applying both concepts to both types of meaning, cosmic and individual, and analyzing the life meaning in terms of both.

Third, Yalom's dismissal of women as, in effect, regressing in their search

for meaning as they grow older, is arguable. Their altruism has not necessarily been imposed; many women in my sample found personal and cosmic meaning in their nurturant roles; to say that in middle years many women become "concerned primarily with themselves rather than with others" is to forget their continuing roles as mothers, wives, children of aging parents, grandmothers, volunteers, and valuable contributors to the business and professional community. It is true that there is evidence to suggest white middle-class men in their forties may allow the more nurturant side of their selves to emerge (Levinson, 1978; Vaillant, 1977), and women may allow the more assertive side of their selves to emerge (Rubin, 1979; Livson, 1976); that in middle age, the contrasex elements of men and women may be permitted expression (Jung, 1971); that men may move toward more passive mastery, and women toward more active mastery (Guttman, 1968). However, a more accurate account of the experience of both men and women may be to say that altruism takes many forms, which include supporting a family or nurturing it. Nor must we overlook the fact that many people find self-fulfillment in altruism. Altruism is not necessarily the opposite of concern with self!

CONCLUSION

In this study the majority of interviewees felt that life had meaning. Definitions of meaning were distinguished from each other by whether the purpose resided within the individual or without, and also by the degree of specificity. There was a tendency for individuals who were loss-oriented to see life meaning or meaninglessness in terms of thematic or repeated loss; the transcendence-oriented perceived meaning in overcoming loss. The majority of interviewees believed one creates one's own life meaning, rather than finding it; the exceptions were those who belonged to the cosmic-specific classification, who believed in divine plan. A major mode of meaning creation is the life review, an on-going rather than end-of-life phenomenon. The creation of meaning can be traced from birth to old age with the aid of the developmental literature.

The creation of life and self meaning is an on-going, life span process, and is accomplished through the transcendence of loss, which can be traced over a lifetime, and can be assisted by therapists.

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